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NEWS RELEASE

January 28, 2013

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Colleagues Gather to Remember Ninth Circuit Judge Otto R. Skopil, Jr.

PORTLAND – Judges of the United States Court of Appeals for the Ninth Circuit convened today in a special session honoring the life of their late colleague, the Honorable Otto R. Skopil, Jr., who was remembered not only as a distinguished jurist but as someone who played an important role in shaping the administration of justice in the federal courts.

Ninth Circuit Chief Judge Alex Kozinski presided over the proceeding at the Pioneer Courthouse, which was attended by family members, friends and many colleagues from the greater Oregon legal community. Speakers included Senior Circuit Judges Alfred T. Goodwin and Edward Leavy of the Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals; Senior District Judge Owen M. Panner of the U.S. District Court for the District of Oregon; Judge Janice R. Wilson of the Multnomah County (Oregon) Circuit Court; attorney Thomas Carter, a former law clerk to Judge Skopil; and O.R. “Rik” Skopil, the son of the late judge.

Judge Skopil died October 18, 2012, at his home in Portland. He was 93.

Judge Skopil came onto the federal bench in 1972 after being nominated by President Nixon to serve on the U.S. District Court for the District of Oregon. He served as chief judge of the district from 1976 to 1979, when President Carter nominated him to the Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals. It was a matter of some pride to Judge Skopil that he had been nominated by presidents from both political parties. He served as an active judge until 1986, when he assumed senior status. He continued to serve the court for many more years, deciding cases submitted on the briefs as recently as 2011.

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Judge Skopil participated in thousands of cases and authored hundreds of decisions, including notable opinions on matters involving Native American tribes, judicial review of criminal sentences, the constitutionality of Oregon's death penalty statute, and enforcement of the Endangered Species Act.

While serving on both the district and appellate courts, Judge Skopil worked hard to broaden the role of magistrate judges in the administration of justice. Appointed by Chief Justice Warren E. Burger, he served as chair of the National Magistrates Committee. He is widely regarded as being the driving force behind the Federal Magistrates Act, having helped formulate the legislation and testifying before Congress on its behalf. The law expanded the authority of magistrate judges to conduct civil trials with the consent of the parties and misdemeanor trials if the defendant waived his right to a trial before a district judge. It also created merit selection panels to assist courts in the appointment of magistrate judges.

In 1990, Chief Justice William H. Rehnquist appointed Judge Skopil to chair the Long Range Planning Committee, which undertook a comprehensive study of the judiciary. The committee made recommendations in a report adopted by the Judicial Conference of the United States in 1995.

A Portland native, Judge Skopil attended Willamette University on an athletic scholarship, earning his B.A. in 1941. He enrolled in the Willamette University College of Law but dropped out to join the Navy at the outset of World War II. He served as a Supply Corps officer in Guadalcanal and Washington, D.C., before leaving the service in 1945. Returning to law school, he received his L.L.B. in 1946 and began his legal career as a solo practitioner. He and a childhood friend later went into partnership together and he continued to practice in Salem, Oregon, until his judicial appointment.

During his 26 years in private practice, Judge Skopil tried cases before every level of the state and federal courts, including an argument in the Supreme Court of the United States. He was elected to the Board of Governors of the Oregon State Bar and was often called upon to speak at the continuing legal education program of the Oregon Bar on condemnation procedures and the Federal Rules of Civil Procedure. He also chaired the Marion County Unethical Conduct Committee.

In addition to his son, Rik, Judge Skopil is survived by his wife of 56 years, Janet; son Casey; daughters Shannon Bronson and Molly Wolfe; five grandchildren; and one great-grandchild.